

## THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

### Matthew 8:18-22

Leo Douma

10/02/2019



A while ago I read the novel 'The Story of Danny Dunn' by Bryce Courtney about the working-class folk that lived at Balmain an inner suburb of Sydney. In one part he writes about how the young men there were encouraging each other to volunteer as soldiers during World War 2. He explains how these young blokes were keen to do their part. They were poor unemployed who had nothing and felt they were nothing. But through the glory of war they thought they could become heroes for their country. Then he describes how many were killed and terribly injured in the war. They came back broken men, forever traumatized by the horrors of war. These young men were naïve. They were all enthusiastic, but they had not really considered the cost of going to war. No one had been honest with them about how terribly the war would brutalize and wreck them. In a sense that is the problem we see in our text; enthusiastic wannabe followers of Jesus who had not counted the cost of discipleship.

We see in our text in verse 18 *"When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake."* Jesus saw something in the crowd that was not right. He was concerned that they were following him because of his miracles and what he could do for them, rather than really wanting to be his disciples. You see, Jesus had become very popular. And no wonder, as the context makes clear. In Matthew chapters 5-7 we have the Sermon on the Mount, where Matthew makes this commentary at the end of the sermon; Matthew 7:28-29 *"When Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were amazed at his teachings, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law"*. Then in chapter 8 we see that Jesus not only teaches with authority, he has authority over diseases and the spiritual world. We see that Jesus healed the man with leprosy, he healed the centurion's servant, and Peter's mother-in-law and Matthew closes that section with the remark in 8:16 *"When evening came, many who were demon possessed were brought to him and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick."* You see what Matthew is doing? He is building a compelling case as to why people should become followers of Jesus. He is one who teaches with authority. He has authority over disease and the spiritual world. And we also see (8:23-27) that he has authority over nature as he calmed the storm. In other words, Matthew is saying 'here is God'. Here is one who has authority over your lives. Now, this is the basis for

discipleship. The reason Jesus can 'call' or 'summons' people to follow him, and follow no matter the cost, is because, as God, they belong to him. And belonging to him they are subject to his authority. When we understand this, we begin to appreciate that we can't follow Jesus on our terms. We must follow, when he calls, on his terms. It is not about what we want but what Christ wants. Now this is important here. You can well imagine why the crowd is following Jesus and why he feels the need to move on to the other side of the lake. The people can see the attractiveness of Jesus, the charisma, the power. They want to get in on the action. They were excited about what Jesus could do for them. But they did not have a heart to follow Jesus and become like Jesus. As a case in point we see a couple of would be followers approach Jesus.

We read of the first one in verse 19: *"Then a teacher of the law came to him and said "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go."* On first glance there is something promising about this person. He is a 'teacher of the law', otherwise known as a 'scribe'. Not only was he bright as a teacher but coming from the Pharisees' group it could be very valuable to have such a guy on the team. He comes across as very respectful towards Jesus. He is ready and resolute; there are no indications of vacillating. And when he says *"I will follow you wherever you go"* it is precisely what Jesus requires of his disciples. This man seems an ideal candidate as a disciple of Jesus. But then Jesus seems to go out of his way to put him off. Look at verse 20: *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."* It's like saying 'I don't have anything so I can't offer you anything.' It would seem the 'teacher of the law' has been carried along by all the excitement of Jesus teachings and healings. But he hasn't stopped to count the cost. He doesn't understand that following Jesus means suffering and death: Gethsemane, the cross at Golgotha, hell and the tomb! Jesus had a home base in Capernaum, but he was always on the road. His travelling ministry meant he was reliant on the hospitality of others. So, Jesus is saying 'If you follow me, I cannot promise you anything but an itinerant life. Foxes have holes they call home. Birds have nests for home. But I will be going from place to place, none of which will be home'. So, Jesus is saying to the scribe: 'If I don't even have the basic comforts of life then if you follow me you won't have much either'. In other words, there's a price to be paid in being a disciple of Jesus. Jesus is brutally honest. There is no sugar coating to try and attract people. If you are going to follow Jesus, there is a cost which you need to think about. Scribes were accustomed to a quiet and easy life. They enjoyed prestige and comfort. Perhaps this 'teacher of the law', this scribe, hadn't thought through his overly quick response and enthusiasm. Maybe subconsciously the feeling was following this healer would make life even better for him. One commentator tells the story of a comedian Yakov Smirnoff who came from Russia to the United States. When he first arrived, he wasn't prepared for the incredible variety of instant products that

were available in American stores. He said on his first shopping trip 'I saw powdered milk- you just add water and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice- you just add water and you get orange juice. Then I saw baby powder and I thought to myself, what a country!' And that's the problem. If we are not careful, we can get the idea that following Jesus is just as easy as getting instant milk. Yes, being right with God is by faith through what Jesus did on the cross. No, you cannot do, and do not have to do, anything for your salvation. Christ has done it all. But following Jesus can involve quiet a sacrifice. And we need to count the cost. We may be asked to rearrange our priorities, to live according to Christ's schedule not ours. Are you willing to let Jesus run your life, no matter what? Matthew does not tell us what the response of the 'teacher of the law' was. But since he is never mentioned again, we can say that the scribe was unwilling to follow Jesus if the cost was that high. There are too many like that today. If we sugar coat discipleship and simply say following Jesus means you are forgiven and can go to heaven; that seems nice. But what if we say: 'No, salvation is not just a free ticket to heaven when you die. It's also about a changed lifestyle. It is about serving Jesus with all of your life, being willing to be strangers in this world, citizens of the kingdom. It is about being willing to serve and suffer for Christ's sake'. What then? Is the cost seen as too high? Is Jesus still attractive or would it be that, like the scribe, interest is lost in Jesus?

In verse 21 we see another man comes to Jesus. It seems that this person also wants to follow Jesus, but he has a problem. If that problem can be resolved then he knows he will be free to do all that Jesus would want: *"Another man, one of his disciples, said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'* (22) *But Jesus told him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'*" Now on first reading Jesus seems to be very harsh. But it is a mistake to think that this man's father has just died, and Jesus is denying him permission to bury him. In Israel the dead were required to be buried the same day they died. So, if the man's father had died, he would not have been in the crowd. He would have been home burying his father. The phrase 'I must go and bury my father' is a term that appears in the Middle East even today. The story is told of a missionary in the Middle East who was talking with a rich young Turkish man and advised him to go on a trip to Europe with him. The missionary thought he could disciple him and work with him after he finished his education. The young man replied, 'I must first of all bury my father'. And the missionary said 'I'm sorry. I had no idea that he had died. I hope I wasn't insensitive.' The young Turk said 'No he isn't dead. That's just a phrase we use. My father is very much alive. I just have to stick around and fulfil my responsibilities till he passes on. And then of course I will receive my inheritance.' So, the person in our text says he wants to follow Jesus, but he has other priorities he wants to settle first. You could say he was hedging his bets, by wanting to be around for the reading of the

will and seeing what he inherited. The response given by Jesus means that when he calls us to follow him, he expects us to obey without delay. The word 'follow me' is in the present imperative. Jesus is literally saying, today, this hour, right now I want you to follow me and become my disciple: *"Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead."* Now just what does Jesus mean by that? How can dead people bury dead people? Obviously, they can't unless Jesus is saying let the spiritually dead bury their physically dead. It's like a proverb; let the dead bury the dead. The saying about the foxes and birds means look I don't have any personal comforts. This saying means let the secular world take care of its own issues. When you follow me, you have been called to the kingdom of God. The world's passing affairs, the coming and going of people, the passing of fortunes from one to another is all part of a secular system, a spiritually dead system. But you are called to a living kingdom.

So, Jesus is not saying Christians can't go to funerals or that you don't have respect for your family. Of course, you do. The fifth commandment is very clear "Honour your father and mother". For Jewish folk nothing was of higher value than respecting and caring for your family. But the call of Jesus is stronger. At this critical moment as he talks to this man nothing on earth, however sacred, must be allowed to come between Jesus and the person he has called. Only Christ can speak in this fashion. He alone has the last word. The point Jesus is making is that no earthly responsibility can compare in importance to the call of following Jesus. The call of Jesus comes before any call of this world. Our obedience to him must take priority over our obedience to any other obligation or duty we may feel we have. Jesus does not want us to neglect our families, but our families are never to pull us away from following Jesus. When there is a conflict of priorities Jesus must always come first.

Now for you there may not be a conflict between what you want to do and what Jesus is calling you to do. But there will be times when Jesus is calling you to go places and do things you would rather not do. He will rearrange your priorities. The point here for us is that the call to follow Jesus is a radical call. It outranks, it takes priority over, everything else in life. No one, nothing is more important. But remember the grace in this call! Jesus' way is the only way to find any life that matters in the long run. Without Jesus we are dead in the water; dead in our sin; dead, eternally separated from God. But God in his mercy made us alive in Christ. All is forgiven and we are reconciled with God. Jesus' summons is a call that takes us out of the realm of the spiritually dead and into his kingdom of hope and life. I do not want you to conclude that Jesus is some hard-nosed task master. Though as our God he has every right to assert himself as Lord in our lives, it is not that he forces us into obedience. He challenges with the

authoritative invitation: "Follow me". And he has the grace and wisdom to warn us that the road is difficult.

What about you? Have you counted the cost? Have you thought through the consequences of following Jesus? What are your priorities at the moment? Are you implying Jesus will just have to wait while you see some other things as more important? Listen to him as he says 'Now, today, this very hour, follow me: don't let family, or work, or sports, or wealth or prestige or anything take priority till your relationship with me is sorted. For your sake, for your family's sake, for your neighbour's sake, nothing, absolutely nothing is more important than me being first in your life. Count the cost and today, now, follow me!